ENCODED COFFEE PACKET

Cross Reference to Related Application

This application claims priority from Provisional Patent Application

Serial No. 60/238,802, filed October 6, 2000 for ENCODED COFFEE PACKET. The

full contents of that provisional patent application are incorporated by reference.

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to coffee machines, and more

particularly, to an encoded coffee packet for use in a coffee machine to direct the

coffee brewing process.

Background of the Invention

Automated coffee machines have long been used for brewing coffee,

both in large-scale commercial settings and in smaller business and home settings.

These machines typically operate on the principle of placing a quantity of ground

coffee into a filter, and passing hot water through the ground coffee to produce a

coffee beverage.

In recent years, such machines have brewed coffee using pre-measured,

pre-packaged quantities of ground coffee, typically in the form of packets which may

be inserted into the coffee machine at the time of brewing, or selected from an onboard

coffee packet supply. These packets, also known as pods or cartridges, simplify the

task of cleaning the machine and replacing used coffee grounds, and ensure more

consistent coffee quality and taste.

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Despite these advantages, however, coffee machines which employ such pre-measured coffee packets typically do not consider variations in individual taste, or the particular characteristics of the packaged coffee grounds. The use of such packets also has heretofore been reserved for espresso coffee making machines, which typically employ consistent size, shape and grind characteristics. Accordingly, applicants have developed a system whereby coffee packets may be encoded with data for use in directing the coffee brewing process to accommodate individual tastes and the particular characteristics of the ground coffee used.

Summary of the Invention

A brewing packet is provided for use in the preparation of hot or cold beverages. The brewing packet envelops a brewing ingredient chosen according to the tastes of a beverage drinker. The packet includes a machine interpretable feature that contains encoded data capable of being read by a beverage producing device. Furthermore, the data on the packet may be capable of directing the beverage producing device to employ a specific brewing operation suited for the particular brewing packet. This allows for producing the optimal beverage from the brewing ingredient. The packet may be utilized with a variety of brewing ingredients to produce a variety of beverages. Similarly, the packet may be configured to produce single or multiple servings of a beverage.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

Fig. 1 is a side view of a packet according to an embodiment of the present invention with a section cut away to reveal the contents of the packet.

Fig. 2 is an isometric view of the packet depicted in Fig. 1.

Fig. 2a is a fragmentary view of the packet shown in Figs. 1 and 2, illustrating an optical bar code encoding configuration.

Fig. 2b is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of a shape.

Fig. 2c is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of a text string.

Fig. 2d is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of a glyph.

Fig. 2e is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of a digital watermark.

Fig. 2f is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of notches.

Fig. 2g is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of grooves.

Fig. 2h is a fragmentary view of an alternative embodiment packet, illustrating encoded data in the form of holes.

Fig. 3 is a schematic representation of a coffee machine constructed in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention, the coffee machine being configured to receive and decipher an encoded packet.

Fig. 4 is a flowchart of a method according to the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Invention

Although the present invention may be used in virtually any brewing machine, it is described herein for use in the context of machines such as those disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,974,949 to Weber et al. and U.S. Patent No. 6,035,762 to Ruckstuhl. Those patents disclose machines for brewing espresso using espresso espresso packets in the form of filter capsules which are received through a funnel into a brewing chamber where water is passed through the filter capsule to produce an espresso beverage. The subject matter of each of these patents is incorporated herein by this reference.

The invention also may be practiced in connection with espresso machines such as those disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,253,385, 4,254,694, 4,353,293, 4,429,623, 4,484,515, 4,555,894 and 4,852,333, all to Illy. These patents disclose various aspects of espresso machines which include brewing chambers configured to receive pre-fabricated espresso packets through which water is passed to produce an espresso drink. The subject matter of each of these patents also is incorporated herein by this reference.

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While the aforementioned machines generally are described for use in connection with espresso packets which contain a single serving of espresso, it will be appreciated that the present invention considers application of the relevant principles to machines which employ coffee packets for use in brewing multiple cups, which employ coffee packets of various size and shape, which employ various filter media and which contain coffee of various varieties, roasts, and grinds. Furthermore, the packet and methodology described herein may also produce other types of beverages such as tea, cider, and/or any beverage which is produced by mixing various ingredients. The packet and methodology is not limited to hot beverages and may be used to produce cold beverages.

As indicated above, a variety of factors beyond the grind of the coffee play a part in the taste of coffee, including factors such as freshness, brew temperature, brew duration, amount of water used, etc. These factors may be dependent on the characteristics of the coffee itself, or may be determined by the tastes of the coffee drinker, even absent an understanding of the effects of changes in the brew operation.

With the foregoing in mind, it will be appreciated that it would be desirable to automatically customize the brew operation based on particular characteristics of the packet, the characteristics of the coffee, and/or the tastes of the user, whether or not the user is aware of what changes in the brew operation will lead to the desired taste. The present invention provides a vehicle for such customization in the form of an encoded packet configured to provide the brewing machine with data

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useful in directing the brewing operation in accordance with packet or packet content characteristics and/or the user's tastes.

Focusing now particularly on the invented encoded coffee packet, it will be appreciated that such packet typically takes the form of a coffee-filled packet configured for placement in a fluid path of a coffee machine whereby hot water (or steam) flows through the packet to produce a coffee beverage. An exemplary packet is depicted in Figs. 1-3, such packet being indicated generally at 10.

In accordance with the present invention, packet 10 is of somewhat conventional construction, including a filter with a first filter portion 12 and a second filter portion 14 which collectively define a cavity 16 containing ground coffee 20. The filter is selected to permit flow of water therethrough, but to restrict flow of the ground coffee therethrough, other than in the form of a coffee beverage.

Typically, the filter takes the form of opposing, water-permeable paper sheets, as indicated, but the filter may be formed of stainless steel, or some other filter material configured to define a cavity for containment of coffee grounds while water and brewed coffee beverage pass therethrough. It is desirable, however, that the filter impart no undesirable taste characteristics to the resulting coffee beverage.

As indicated above, opposing filter portions 12 and 14 are secured together about their respective perimeters to form cavity 16. In the depicted embodiment, the filter portions are secured to an orbicular gasket 18. The gasket is deformable to allow for an optimum seal. In an alternative embodiment, the packet may be integrally formed from a continuous filter in which no gasket is required.

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Although the depicted packet is circular, it will be appreciated that the cavity may take virtually any shape capable of containing coffee grounds. The size and bed depth 40 of the packet is determined by the quantity of coffee grounds, the density of coffee grounds, and the desired coffee beverage taste.

As shown in Fig. 2, packet 10 includes a machine interpretable feature 30 which directs operation of the coffee machine in accordance with predefined brewing directives. In the first depicted embodiment, the machine interpretable feature is a barcode 31 as depicted in Fig. 2 and 2a. It will be understood that the machine interpretable feature may be any machine readable feature associated with packet 10.

Examples of alternative embodiments are depicted in Figs. 2b through 2h. In Fig. 2b the feature is geometric shape 32. The shape may be raised or lowered and may, or may not incorporate color, or some other machine-interpretably characteristic. Fig. 2c shows text string 33. The text string may consist of alphanumeric characters and may be of various lengths including a single character. Fig. 2d shows glyph 34. The glyph may be any symbolic figure including a symbol used as a trademark. A digital watermark 35 is depicted in Fig. 2e. Fig. 2f shows notches 36. The notches may be localized to a particular area of the packet or may span its entire perimeter in singular or repetitive fashion. Grooves 37 are depicted in Fig. 2g. One or more grooves may be incorporated to create a texture. Fig. 2h shows holes. One or more holes may be used, which holes may be, of various shapes and sizes. The above-noted machine interpretable features; or other machine interpretable features, may similarly may be employed in combination or alone, such features being selected for

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their ability to store brewing directives and packet and/or ingredient-characteristic data, and for their cost of manufacture, aesthetic appearance, and ability to carry machine interpretal features which are capable of being successfully detected, read, and interpreted.

Machine interpretable feature 30, it will be appreciated, is capable of storing a significant amount of data, including specific brewing directives and/or packaging or ingredient characteristics. Examples of the types of brewing directives stored in machine interpretable feature 30 may include, for example, contact time, contact pattern, fluid volume, fluid temperature, fluid pressure, and/or fluid pass-through rate. The above brewing directives are all well known in the coffee brewing industry to affect the taste and quality of the coffee beverage. Examples of ingredient characteristics which may be stored in machine interpretable feature 30 include grind, blend, roast, quantity, bed depth, freshness, and expiration date. These examples are meant to be exemplary, not limiting in scope.

Fig. 3 schematically depicts a coffee machine 100 designed to utilize packet 10. In the depicted embodiment, packet 10 is positioned between input fluid path 110 and output fluid path 112. Gasket 18 helps form a seal between chamber 114, defining the input fluid path, and chamber 116, defining the output fluid path. Gasket 18 also helps secure packet 10 in place. In other embodiments, packet 10 is held in place by gravity, water pressure, friction, adhesion, magnetism, or other suitable mechanisms. As depicted, water passes into packet 10 along input fluid path 110, passing through filter portion 12. The water contacts ground coffee within packet

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10, producing a coffee beverage. The coffee beverage then flows through packet 10 and out through filter portion 14. Thereafter, the coffee beverage continues along output fluid path 112 and into beverage receptacle 120. In one embodiment, water is stored in a reservoir (not shown) within coffee machine 100 and heated before entering input fluid path 110. Alternatively, water is externally heated before entering input fluid path 110, or not heated at all. Beverage receptacle 120 may be dimensioned to accommodate multiple servings of the brewed coffee beverage, or may be dimensioned to receive a single serving of brewed coffee.

Coffee machine 100 includes a sensor 130 designed to read machine interpretable feature 30 of packet 10. Sensor 130 is in turn operatively connected to a processor 140 which controls coffee machine 100. Machine interpretable feature 30 may store data which is read by sensor 130 and passed to processor 140. Processor 140 may then direct the brewing operation in accordance with its interpretation of the data derived from machine interpretable feature 30. For example, processor 140 may direct coffee machine 100 to brew using a pre-selected contact time, contact pattern, fluid quantity, fluid temperature, fluid pressure, and/or fluid pass-through rate expressed in machine interpretable feature 30. Alternatively, the processor may itself make determinations of contact time, contact pattern, fluid quantity, fluid temperature, fluid pressure, and/or fluid pass-through rate based on information contained in machine interpretable feature 30. The processor may also, based on information contained in machine interpretable feature 30, direct the coffee machine to add water, milk, cream, sugar, or any suitable condiment to the coffee beverage.

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As alluded to above, machine interpretable feature 30 need not store data specifically including brewing directives and ingredient characteristics. Instead machine interpretable feature 30 may act as an identifier so that brewing directives and ingredient characteristics may be looked up from data storage 150 within (or external to) coffee machine 100. Sensor 130 thus may read machine interpretable feature 30 and processor 140 may match the machine interpretable feature with predefined brewing operation instructions stored in such memory. Processor 140 may then direct the brewing operation based on brewing operation instructions. In one embodiment, the brewing operation instructions are matched to a machine interpretable feature using a look-up table in which brewing operation instructions correspond in a one-to-one ratio with each known ingredient variety, packet size, packet construction, user preference, etc. It will be appreciated, however, that other arrangements for matching machine interpretable feature 30 with brewing directives similarly may be used.

Referring now to Fig. 4, a method of operation for the present invention is illustrated at 200. At 202, a brewing packet encoded with packet-characteristic data is placed into a brewing device. At 204, the packet- characteristic data is read by a sensor. At 206, the packet-characteristic data is interpreted by a processor. Finally, at 208, brewing is directed in accordance with the packet-characteristic data read by the sensor and interpreted by the processor.

Because the processor may be employed to effect the aforementioned predefined brewing directives based on the machine interpretable feature associated with each packet. The brewing operation may be made consistent based on consistent

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machine interpretable features from packet to packet. Similarly, the brewing operation may be altered in accordance with desired brewing characteristics each time the packet is replaced. Particular brew characteristics thus may be controlled simply by selection of a packet with the desired encoded brewing directives (whether or not such directives are known to the coffee machine operator). Control of the brewing process thus may be handed off to the brewing professionals who produce the packets, rather than relying on untrained machine operators. This may be done without sacrificing variety in brew operation based on differing characteristics of the packet contents or consumer tastes.

For example, a person desiring weaker coffee may purchase packets designated such in order to direct the machine to add water to the brewed coffee beverage in accordance with proper brewing procedure. This avoids problems associated with ill-advised attempts to dilute coffee by decreasing the quantity of coffee used, a change which may result in a corresponding change in bed depth, and thus in an undesirable change in coffee taste.

The encoded packets also may be used to track brewing information which may be useful in ensuring satisfaction with the brewed coffee beverage. For example, the packet may include an encoded date for use in tracking freshness of the coffee grounds contained within the packet. Upon determining that the packet is stale, the processor may direct the machine to note such staleness, thus avoiding an unsatisfactory beverage. Similarly, the packet may contain encoded data related to the coffee blend contained within the packet, such data being stored in memory to provide

a history of coffee blends. The encoded packet also may contain encoded data defining the source of the packet so as to prohibit use of counterfeit packets, or packets from unauthorized suppliers.

While the invention has been disclosed in its preferred form, the specific embodiments thereof as disclosed and illustrated herein are not to be considered in a limiting sense as numerous variations are possible. The subject matter of the invention is regarded to include all novel and non-obvious combinations and subcombinations of the various elements, features, functions and/or properties disclosed herein. No single feature, function, element or property of the disclosed embodiments is essential. The following claims define certain combinations and subcombinations which are regarded as novel and non-obvious. Other combinations and subcombinations of features, functions, elements and/or properties may be claimed through amendment of the present claims or presentation of new claims in this or a related application. Such claims are also regarded as included within the subject matter of applicant's invention irrespective of whether they are broader, narrower, or equal in scope to the original claims.